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ABSTRACT

Poetry is fundamental. As a response to reality, as an inclination of language, it is basic. If English teachers want their students to become poets or readers of poets or even imaginative and provocative users of language, they have to show them that the language of poetry is theirs, and English teachers can accomplish that task only by endorsing poetry in the classroom. Poetry belongs in the classroom as a basic skill because it necessitates a confrontation with words. Moreover, teaching poetry teaches people to read. Also, those students who are most in touch with literary tradition will be the best equipped to read the contemporary works that shape their lives. No student should be deprived of his or her participation in the intertextual dialogue that comprises the foundation of the humanities. If poetry is taught only in honors English classes and only as preparatory material for college, then only the students in those classes will be prepared to read the essays and books that presuppose an allusive connection to the past. Not teaching poetry is elitist; not teaching poetry disenfranchises part of the reading public. (Appendixes include a selective bibliography on poetry instruction, an exercise to accompany the study of sonnets, a description of a poetry project, and sample exercises for poetry warm-ups.) (HOD)

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The Case for Poetry: A Humanist's Perspective

by

P. L. Hirsch
Northwestern University

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"A poem, Robert Frost once said, begins in delight and ends in wisdom." Is that what happens in the classroom (Bourdette 3)? If poetry is so delightful, why are students so often antagonistic toward it? Why do those same students who enjoy song lyrics and advertising jingles consider poetry dry or effeminate or embarrassing or irrelevant or effete? Thinking about our session today, naturally I started asking myself why poetry is the "neglected genre" and how we could be neglecting it when we entered this profession eager to share our enthusiasm for poetry, our love of language and literature, with others. Didn't we find Shakespeare or Keats or Yeats more exciting than finding square roots? And didn't we, like Emily Dickinson, recognize poetry when we felt that the tops of our heads might just blow off? I was certain that most of you teach poetry and teach it well, that you might not be worried about its neglect so much as you're looking for new strategies to make your commitment to poetry work, to make poetry indeed an instrument for sharing wisdom and delight.

There are some paradoxical aspects to our session, then, that seem to be worth talking about at the outset; first, that the people in this room are probably the very teachers who <u>don't</u> neglect poetry, and second, that if that hypothesis is wrong, that if those of us who believe in the importance of poetry do in fact neglect it, then poetry must be neglected by most English teachers because they find it too difficult to teach, too unpopular, too impractical. The idea of teaching

poetry makes us stumble; maybe we're too sensitive to our students' complaints, too worried that they need to work on other basic skills. Maybe they don't need to understand metaphor if they can't write a complete sentence or an adequate essay. Poetry isn't the genre of our age, after all, not what drama was to the crowds who flocked to the Globe Theatre or what the novel was to those voracious magazine readers of Charles Dickens and George Eliot. If poetry is neglected in the microcosm of the classroom, maybe that's because it's peripheral to the macrocosm, neglected by the larger society that the schools reflect.

What, then, do we teachers of poetry need in this climate? What can we panel members offer each other and our frustrated colleagues? What, especially, can I offer in my role as our theorist who's certainly not supposed to steal the show with witticisms or even practical strategies. The answer, I think, is reassurance. If poetry is a neglected genre, then teachers of poetry need reassurance that it is indeed fundamental, persistent, and practical; reassurance that the teaching of poetry is democratic and basic rather than elitist and superfluous, reassurance that it serves the needs of all students, not just those who read poetry because they have to; indeed, we need to reassure ourselves that poetry is necessary to the English curriculum, that it can be taught effectively, and that teaching poetry is fun. What I'd like to do, to provide that reassurance, is to define some of the ways in which poetry is fundamental, both intrinsically and pedagogically.

First, we have to ask ourselves what makes poetry in and of itself fundamental as a human activity. Why have people been writing poetry for centuries, and why, even in this time of relative neglect, do they still feel the need to read poetry and to write it? I find it helpful to remember that poetry has been around as long as culture has. In Homo Ludens, the brilliant study of serious play and the origins of culture that lies behind so much modern game theory, Johan Huizinga reminds us of the close connection between poiesis and philosophy or religion. The archaic poet, or vates was a prophet, seer, or priest, a Knower whose riddles and competitions were aesthetic, but, more importantly, were spiritual (119-20). "Poetry everywhere precedes prose," Huizinga explains, because it is "the only adequate vessel" for "the utterance of solemn or holy things" (127). Like all of the serious play that he defines, poetry can be seen as a completely absorbing, voluntary activity, outside the sphere of "ordinary" life, proceeding within its own boundaries according to its own rules in an orderly way (13). Huizinga sees all serious play--games, myths, and drama, even contexts in law and politics--as civilizing factors; in other words, serious play like poetry turns ordinary, natural life, into society. Man's need to write poetry seems to be as fundamental as his need to live together in meaningful communities. In our era, brilliant poets like T. S. Eliot and William Butler Yeats have functioned as this kind of wise man or knower, using poetry to analyze the world for the rest of us, to

prophesy war, to explore connections between this life and some larger spiritual presence. Huizinga's ideas about poetry might help us discern the links between poets like these and the epic poets or poet-priests of the past.

I find Huizinga's ideas about poetry and culture interesting from another point of view, however, that further underscores the fundamental connection of poetry to society. Poetry has always functioned as the language of social protest. Yearning to impose order on chaos in an effort to rectify injustice, poets use language as a weapon. Consider contemporary poets like Alice Walker and Ntozake Shange, for example; if poetry weren't fundamental, why would they be writing poems about racial injustice and rape? Shange writes,

> every 3 minutes a woman is beaten
> every five minutes
> a woman is raped/ every ten minutes
> a lil girl is molested
> yet i rode the subway today
> . . . . .
> women's bodies are found
> in alleys & bedrooms/ at the top of the stairs
> before i ride the subway/ buy a paper/ drink
> coffee/ i must know/
> have you hurt a woman today
> did you beat a woman today . . .
> (Nappy Edges 114-16)

Poetry is fundamental because it speaks to our direst needs. "You had to go to funerals," writes Alice Walker,

> Even if you didn't know the
> People
> Your Mama always did
> Usually your Pa.
> In new patent leather shoes
> It wasn't so bad
> And if it rained
> The graves dropped open
> And if the sun was shining

You could take some of the
Flowers home
In your pocket
book. At six and seven
The face in the gray box
Is always your daddy's
Old schoolmate
Mowed down before his
Time.
You don't even ask
After a while
What makes them lie so
Awfully straight
And still. . . .
(Revolutionary Petunias 7)

Poetry has always been the mind's response to injustice when the heart is breaking. Thus, poets write about war and separation and death.

And it's not just famous poets who rely on poetry for its redemptive, therapeutic value. Every month in the newsletter from ANAD, the National Association for Anorexia Nervosa, ordinary people who are suffering from the isolation of this life-threatening illness submit verse for publication. In a poem called "Listen to Me," one anonymous poet cries,

I'm hurt and angry with you today,
Once again you told me I wasn't okay.

Oh, you say you love me, but then when I do
Something that displeases you
You get angry, change the subject, shut me out,
walk away.
Don't you know, rejection is what you convey?
. . . . .
When I try to tell you how I . . . feel,
When I take off my mask and attempt to reveal
The Me that I am; when I open my heart
You put up barriers which tear me apart. . . .

Teenagers write poems about parents who don't listen, friendships that strain and break, schools and communities that are riddled

with unfairness.

Fortunately, happy people write poetry too; joy is as fundamental as mourning. As Philip Appleman explains in a recent defense of poetry, "thousands of poets" in "Queens and Seattle and Kokomo" write "hundreds of thousands of poems every year" with no hope of "fame or fortune." Instead of playing tennis or making quiche, Appleman says, tney write poetry because "it's a special kind of pleasure," "the pleasure of creating a whole thing, a telling that's beyond the capacity of prose." According to Appleman, the pleasure of writing poetry has "something to do with our continuing effort to understand ourselves, to organize our experience, to enrich and discipline our expression. . . (456). On one level, as some of the best recent textbooks about poetry remind us, poetry is a game, a language game; anyone who reads poetry can play, and the person who writes it--the poet--can win.

Granted, then, poetry is fundamental; as a response to reality, as an inclination of language, it's basic. Yet, as teachers, we still need to be assured tnat poetry is necessary to the curriculum. Perhaps the future T. S. Eliots and Alice Walkers of the world should be left alone to do what they're already doing well. Perhaps poetry, like gravity and daylight, is a force that asserts itself without our help and we English teachers, who have more than enough to teach already, should leave it alone.

Perhaps--but I think not. We cannot abdicate what's basic

to the humanist's position. There will be more T. S. Eliots and Alice Walkers if students have a chance to enjoy poetry in the classroom, not to mention more readers of Eliot and Walker and ideally even the better society that so many poets describe. Devotees of Virginia Woolf surely remember her concern in A Room of One's Own about the absence of women writers in Shakespeare's time. "It's a perennial puzzle," Woolf notes,

> why no woman wrote a word of that extraordinary literature when every other man, it seemed, was capable of song or sonnet. (43)

Woolf's essay is an argument about the importance of literary tradition; except for an occasional genius, she explains, suffering human beings who lack money and encouragement cannot possibly write good fiction or poetry. "For masterpieces are not single and solitary births," she explains;

> they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice. (69)

The implications of Woolf's ideas for our subject are obvious: if we want to produce poets, we need to put the weight of the mass behind the aspiring voice. And how lucky we are then! We English teachers are in a position to direct that mass, to create that support. To the extent that poetry is an art, a craft, we can give our students a setting in which to learn it. If we want our children to become poets or readers of poets or even imaginative and provocative users of language, we have to show them that the language of poetry is theirs, and we can accomplish that task only by endorsing poetry in the classroom.

Poetry belongs in the classroom as a basic skill; it's basic because it necessitates a confrontation with words. And again we're lucky--think about it: lyric poems are short. When we teach Crime and Punishment and Great Expectations, we struggle with time; there's hardly a free moment for students to ponder a word or consider a writer's carefully sculpted syntax. But there's time in a class session to ask what Gwendolyn Brooks means by "straight" and "crooked" in her ten-line poem, "Hunchback Girl: She Thinks of Heaven." There's time to have students read some of the major poets and to write ungraded responses about the duke's nature in "My Last Duchess" and Wilfred Owens's response to war. If teaching poetry is a luxury in any sense, that sense is positive: we can use poetry to give ourselves time.

Moreover, teaching poetry teaches people to read. Chad Klinger, author of one of the newer "how to write poetry" books, claims that "the best reason for studying poetry . . . is the practical one: if an individual can read and write it, he or she can read and write anything" (8-9). George Gopen makes a similar point in the April issue of College English. Gopen, an assistant professor of English at Loyola University in Chicago who also holds a law degree from Harvard, argues that the study of lyric poetry is the best possible preparation for the study of law. It may be "comforting," he says, for pre-law students to have courses in American history or philosophy or math, but none of these is essential, whereas courses that teach critical reading

and critical writing are. Gopen praises the formalist techniques of reading poetry that grew out of the New Criticism, encouraging students to examine words in context. "No other discipline," he argues, "so closely replicates the central question asked in the study of legal thinking: 'Here is a text; in how many ways can it have meaning?'" Gopen cites passages from Shakespeare and Keats to make his point; "the study of poetry helps students learn how to analyze language," he explains,

> to recognize ambiguity, and to develop consistency in interpretation. . . . to understand the law is to understand the possibilities of texts, and that is precisely the province of the study of poetry. (347)

Advocates of poetry support it because it's practical. In a democratic society, one could also argue that the study of poetry is necessary to promote equal rights. Consider the issue of equality in relation to the present trend in literary criticism, the trend away from New Criticism, in which "intertextuality" is the word of the day. Deconstructionists and semioticians talk about books talking to other books, about the insufficiency of independent readings and the necessary connection of texts to prior texts; critics like Harold Bloom and Jonathan Culler talk about the dependence of books on previous works that they absorb and then transform. Umberto Eco makes a similar point in his best-selling novel, The Name of the Rose. That mystery, which takes place in a medieval monastery, is largely a book about books. In one section, Eco's detective, Brother William, talks to Adso, his assistant. Discussing a parchment that he has translated from the Greek, William explains to Adso that its

meaning is still vague to him. "Perhaps I'll have to read other books," he says. Adso is astonished: "To know what one book says you must read others?" William explains, "At times this can be so. Often books speak of other books. Often a harmless book is like a seed that will blossom into a dangerous book, or it is the other way around: it is the sweet fruit of a bitter stem. In reading Albert, couldn't I learn what Thomas might have said?" (286)

Nowadays, if this interdependence is thought to be truer than ever, if we believe that people can't sufficiently understand one literary work without understanding another, then those students who are most in touch with literary tradition will be the best equipped to read the contemporary works which shape their lives. As semioticians talk about the science of codes and signs, the study of allusion becomes crucial. If our students are all to have access to the same cultural heritage, they have to share the major texts that give rise to those allusions or at least they must be given the tools to approach those texts. No student should be deprived by us of his or her participation in this intertextual dialogue that comprises the foundation of the humanities. To some extent the decision of whether or not to teach poetry is a political issue. If poetry is taught only in honors English classes and only as preparatory material for college, then only the students in those classes will be prepared to read the essays and books that presuppose an allusive connection to the past. Not teaching poetry is elitist; not teaching poetry disenfranchises part of the reading public.

Those of us who believe in equal rights must find this disenfranchisement wrong. If poetry has accompanied the development of culture since the beginning of time, then we don't need to save it for the honors student and the college-bound.

Clearly, then, for all of these reasons and more, poetry must take its place in the classroom. If it isn't taught as often or as well as it might be, the failure may have less to do with insufficient justification than it does with our need for new materials or the need for more support from each other. Or perhaps we're bothered by pretension. Perhaps we fear that we shouldn't teach poetry if our students can't write well enough, if they're not going to be Emily Dickinsons or Robert Lowells.

Not being a poet myself, I find this hesitation natural, but dangerous and wrong. And I'd like to end my call for reassurance by moving our session in the direction of the practical and the possible; I'd like to end by sharing with you part of a friend's process-oriented ninth grade unit on poetry that represents a healthy trend in the teaching of poetry and the commitment to return it, revitalized, to the classroom. This exercise in writing sonnets, like the exercises in several of the books on my bibliography, works well because it's personal and varied, exploratory rather than judgmental, process- rather than product-oriented.

Over a period of several weeks, while students are studying sonnets in class, they are told to write a poem about a mythological creature. From a list of creatures that my friend

Andrea distributes, students are to research several and choose one to which they feel a special connection. Several days later, they are to come to class with a list of their creature's physical characteristics, its symbolic meanings, and several paragraphs in their composition journals on their thoughts about that creature. Finally, students are to write a sonnet or a poem resembling a sonnet, according to the following rules. In the first quatrain, in lines of roughly the same length or meter, they are to introduce their creature and describe its physical characteristics. In the second and third quatrains they are to discuss its symbolic associations and to comment on themselves. Then in the last two lines, which should rhyme, they are to sum up what they have in mind. Andrea doesn't worry too much about grades in her evaluation because her whole poetry unit is run informally as a workshop. When her students work with poetry, she wants them to understand that poetry is a discipline, but more importantly she wants them to see what they can do with language. She wants them to think about words and ideas, and, not least of all, to have fun. Students who display a reasonable amount of effort and follow the rules established for the poem get a "B." Students who display originality or insight can earn an "A." Even those "A" students, however, aren't poets in the strict sense of the word; they are students who have learned what is involved in reading poetry well and what is involved in trying to produce it in this and other exercises, such as "list poems," "computer poems" and "shape poems." Having experimented

with poetry themselves, surely these students are wiser when they read Robert Browning and Sylvia Plath.

And that's the point--as old as Horace: poetry should instruct and poetry should delight. Appleman speaks for me by saying that "it's impossible to have too many poets," that "a nation of 200 million people should have 200 million poets" (457). The "experience of a fine poem," he says, "is an end product of civilization," a "final satisfaction," and therefore the reason "for the alphabet, for language, for books," for the forty-hour week, and finally for education itself. Far from being irrelevant, poetry is special because it's almost totally "self-justifying." It belongs in the English curriculum because it's a primary function of language. To teach poetry well is to teach the joy and the meaning of being alive.

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Woolf, Virginia. A Room of One's Own. 1929. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1957.

POETRY: A SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. REFERENCE BOOKS AND CRITICAL STUDIES

Note: Since the most popular poetry textbooks are New Critical in their approach, I've included some historical studies in the following list of reference books and prosody studies. Tuve especially is known for indicting the supremacy of New Criticism, and Smith's unusual study of closure is largely structuralist.

Abrams, M. H. A Glossary Of Literary Terms. 4th ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1981.

Attridge, Derek. The Rhythms of English Poetry. English Language Series 14. London: Longman, 1982.

Breslin, Paul. A Guide for the Prosodically Perplexed. 3rd ed. An unpublished guide used by Breslin for his poetry classes at Northwestern University. Available on request: write to the author, Department of English, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL 60201.

Brooks, Cleanth and Robert Penn Warren. "Appendix B" in Understanding Poetry. 4th ed. New York: Holt Rinehart, 1976.

Clausen, Christopher. The Place of Poetry: Two Centuries of an Art in Crisis. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1981.

Fussell, Paul, Jr. Poetic Meter and Poetic Form. New York: Random House, 1965.

Hartman, Charles O. Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980.

Lipking, Lawrence. The Life of the Poet: Beginning and Ending Poetic Careers. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981.

Martz, Louis L. The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century. 1954. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962.

Perrine, Laurence. Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry. 6th ed. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1982.

Preminger, Alex, Frank J. Warnke, and O. B. Hardison, Jr., eds. Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics. Enlarged ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974.

Smith, Barbara Herrnstein. Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968.

Tuve, Rosemond. Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery: Renaissance Poetic and Twentieth Century Critics. 1947. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.

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II. TEXTBOOKS FOR CLASSROOM USE

(Try writing to publishers for free examination copies.)

Bourdette, Robert E., Jr. and Michael Cohen. The Poem in Question.** New York: Harcourt Brace, 1983.

Boynton, Robert W. and Maynard Mack. Introduction to the Poem.* 2nd ed. Hasbrouck Heights, NJ: Hayden Book, 1980.

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Sugg, Richard P. Appreciating Poetry.** Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975.

* used at Roycemore School, Evanston, IL and/or New Trier, Winnetka, IL
** generally considered a college text

MYTHOLOGICAL CREATURES:
An Exercise to Accompany the Study of Sonnets*

This exercise is designed to help students understand what is involved in reading and writing poetry and to encourage them to think and write thoughtfully about poems they're studying in class. As Florence Grossman reminds us in Getting From Here to There: Writing and Reading Poetry, "the idea is to establish an ease with poetry, the kind of knowledge and appreciation that can only come from having written it, the understanding that a poem is not an object to be decoded and divided according to nomenclature, rather a tool, a way of helping the student find his own poem" (Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1982 [163]).

The exercise stretches over several weeks as students study sonnets and other lyric poems in class. One should remember that the goal of the unit is not the production of flawless end products.

Initially students are to do research on several mythological creatures and finally to choose one to which they feel a special connection. They are to come to class with a list of their creature's physical characteristics, its symbolic meanings, and several paragraphs in a composition journal on their thoughts about that creature.

Students are then asked to write a poem resembling a sonnet. In the first quatrain, using lines of roughly the same length or meter, they are to introduce their creature, concentrating on physical characteristics. In the second and third quatrains they are to discuss their creature's symbolic associations and its relation to themselves. In the last two lines, which should rhyme, they are to make some kind of summary statement.

In this exercise some students concentrate on language and meter but many are intrigued by self-analysis.

* For more information about this sonnet unit, write to Andrea Brownstein, c/o Roycemore School, 640 Lincoln, Evanston, IL 60201.

THE NYMPH by Becky Lezak**

The creature we call the nymph
Takes the form of a human female,
She tries to protect her kingdom of nature,
If it is harmed, she takes revenge.

I, too, have a human form,
I have two eyes, arms, and legs.
We are both of the same female race
We can make the same motions.

We both try to protect our environment
One we live with and like,
When I am mad I take revenge
We share some same ideas.

There, deep inside of all of us,
We are part creature.

MANTICORE by Edye Richard

A manticore is an ugly human-hating beast
He has the power of inflicting pain, and of flight;
Upon human beings it likes to feast,
This is not a creature you would enjoy to fight.

I am this creature, I am evil and mean;
I will get you in the end;
Just test me and you'll be tortured till you scream,
I'll force your body to abnormally twist and bend.

This human-hating beast should never be trusted
He has the power to destroy all life
He'll beat you with his scorpion tail till all your bones
are busted
Hide your children, your mother, your wife.

Don't try to battle with a manticore,
You will definitely lose the war.

THE GRIFFIN by Annie Aune

The Griffin has the body of a lion,
Winged or wingless, and the head of a bird.
Often it symbolizes royalty
But its precise meaning is unknown.

Its large tail end
Resembles mine
It has big ears
I hear everything.

No one really knows
What the Griffin stands for.
No one can foretell
What I'll be like.

Griffins are mysterious
Like every one of us.

** This student work is taken from Write! (May, 1983), a student publication at Roycemore School under Andrea Brownstein's direction.

POETRY PROJECT
(used at New Trier High School for freshman*)

Choose one of the following:

1. Put together a poetry scrapbook using pictures, lines, and poems for one of the following:

   a. a scrapbook for a child or for a children's room in a hospital

   b. a scrapbook for a gift: Mother's Day, birthday, Christmas

   c. a scrapbook illustrating the cycle of a day or year

   d. a scrapbook illustrating a place you enjoy; for example, a map of a walk in the countryside with appropriate poems for beautiful spots along the way

2. Plan a poetry program for presentation in class; use recorded music for background music.

3. Photograph several scenes, persons, or objects you enjoy and find poems to accompany your photographs. Present them in a bulletin board display or slide show.

4. Take a poem you like and write music appropriate for the words for presentation in class.

5. Prepare an oral interpretation of a poem or selection of poems for presentation to the class.

6. Come to me with a project of your own.

SELF DISCOVERY -- POETRY WARM-UPS

1. Describe a recent dream or significant experience you have had.
2. Underline 4-6 significant words from your description.
3. Write two or three impressionistic sentences for each word as it relates to your life at present.
4. Title your dream.
5. Compose a spontaneous poem or folk tale which generates from your personal discovery made in steps 1 through 4.
6. Title your poem or folk tale.

* * *

Circle of 8

Quiet

Everybody take one paper and pencil.

Write first word of poem on top line and pass to left.

Write third word and hold. Fold over top word only and pass to left.

Write fourth word and fold one. Top words showing when passing.

To end, write next to last word, fold over and pass.

Write last word, fold and pass.

Open up and punctuate.

Share.

* For further information, write to Jane Schwalbach, English Department, New Trier High School, Winnetka, IL 60093.